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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000170

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR ECA - AROMANOWSKI; ECA/PE - LPEREZ,
ECA/PE/C/CV - DSCHUMAN AND SCOHEN; ECA/PE/V/R/N - LMOODY AND
SABED-KOTOB; NEA/PPD AFERNANDEZ AND PAGNEW, NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO SCUL OEXC IZ MU
SUBJECT: AMERICAN FILMS SHOWCASED IN ARAB CULTURAL CAPITAL

¶11. Summary: This year's Muscat Film Festival, January 21-28, was held in conjunction with the month-long Muscat Festival to showcase Muscat as this year's Arab Cultural Capital. Taken together, these events provided an ideal platform for the Embassy to reach a substantial Omani audience numbering in the tens of thousands from all over Oman. End summary.

U.S. Films and Expert a Hit

¶12. The U.S. film entries, "Capote" and "Good Night and Good Luck," were popular with the largely youthful audiences. Dr. Richard Pena, Director of the New York Film Society and a professor of film at Columbia University, reached young Omani film and media professionals by participating in the opening and closing ceremonies, holding ongoing informal and ad hoc discussions among Festival participants including the judges and several young Arab film-makers, and by watching eight daily film screenings.

¶13. Mr. Pena's program included a public lecture on the history of U.S. cinema and on U.S. avant-garde film; a live interview with Oman Radio on American film and on the development of an Omani national film industry; broad and far-reaching discussion at a representational event with members of the Omani Film Society, private film producers, and Ministry of Information officials; and the opportunity to introduce the two U.S. films at their Festival screenings. Throughout all activities, Mr. Pena gave guidance and direction to Festival organizers, privately providing them a professional critique of the Omani feature film, "Al Boom," and providing guidance, encouragement and mentoring to a number of young Arabic directors and producers at the Festival.

Media Coverage

¶14. In addition to an Oman Radio interview (estimated listenership: 300,000) and broad press coverage of the Festival itself, a member of the Omani Film society who works as a free-lance journalist wrote an article for the government-owned Arabic daily "Oman" newspaper (circulation 22,000) on Mr. Pena's lecture and describing the American films, making extensive use of the Embassy-supplied press kit.

Logistical Hiccups

¶15. Unfortunately, the Film Festival was plagued by various problems. The schedule appeared only days before the festival opening; expedited customs clearance and re-plattering of the films was delayed due to the lack of follow-through. Other Embassies participating in the Festival experienced similar difficulties. While we believe that the Festival continues to offer the potential for significant outreach to the Omani public, we also believe our interaction and cooperation with the Film Society should include NGO management and capacity building.

Iraqi Participation

¶16. A serendipitous off-shoot of the Embassy's participation in the Festival was the chance for Emboffs to meet the Director of the Baghdad Film Festival, Mr. Tahir Abid Muslim, head of the NGO No Borders Iraqi Cinematographers, founded in 2004 after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and well as the first female Saudi film-maker and IV alumna, Haifaa Al-Mansour, whose film "Women Without Shadows" won several prizes, including the golden khanjar (a traditional Omani dagger) for best film. Muslim welcomed USG interest in the Baghdad film festival, held for the first time in December 2005.

Feedback

18. Feedback from Festival participants and the overall audience were consistently positive and enthusiastic. An Omani film producer (and graduate of USC's film program) called "Capote" the best film he had seen over the past year. Several of the young Arab directors and Festival participants thanked the Embassy for bringing Mr. Pena, and for his role in providing guidance to them in their endeavors. The synergies from this interaction will undoubtedly play out over the next several years, perhaps even by bringing these young directors' works to Festivals and Film Series organized by Mr. Pena and the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Internet Commentary

19. A posting on the Omani Internet forum, "The Muscatis," (www.muscatis.blogspot.com) said: ". They (the Festival organizers) have obviously gone to the American, British and French embassy (sic) and asked them to supply movies for the festival... the U.S. Embassy was good enough to give two Oscar-caliber movies from the current season." Another posting complained of the poor scheduling: "Tomorrow "Goodnight and Good Luck" will show at 8pm in one cinema and . "Capote" will play at 10pm in the other cinema. There's no way you can watch both because of the scheduling and of the distance. It really sucks to schedule the two most high-profile movies of the whole festival on the same night like that. Especially when Philip Seymour Hoffman is the front-runner to win the best actor Oscar this year."

BALTIMORE